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A survey on mentoring, first incumbency, and the role of retired clergy: Listening to bishops

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### **Abstract**

This study set out to explore current attitudes and practice of bishops and dioceses of the Church of England concerning the role of retired clergy, with special reference to the role of mentor to clergy serving in their first incumbency. Replies were received from 30 of the 43 diocesan bishops (or those responding on their behalf). The data demonstrated that of the 30 participating dioceses, 26 had experience of using retired clergy as mentors to clergy in their first incumbency, and 25 considered this to be a good idea in principle. The other most frequently named roles for retired clergy within these 30 dioceses were as mentors more generally, as interim ministers in vacant parishes, as rural deans, and as ministry or work consultants. Other roles identified were as reflective practitioner, as worship leader, and as an assistant archdeacon. These summary statistics are illuminated and enriched by qualitative data.

*Keywords:* Church of England, bishops, retired clergy, mentoring

### **Introduction**

A number of recent studies have drawn attention to the importance of mentoring for the personal and professional development of effective leaders across a range of different professions, including work reported by Samier (2000), Ehrich, Tennent, and Hansford (2002), Stoddard (2003), Herbohn (2004), Underhill (2006), Talley (2008) and Starr (2014). Of particular relevance for clergy is the growing literature on mentoring in the sphere of effective leadership in schools, focusing especially on trainee teachers, beginning teachers and members of the senior management team, including school principals (Daresh, 2004; Hobson & Sharp, 2005; Achinstein & Athanases, 2006; Harrison, Dymoke, & Pell, 2006; Barnett & O'Mahony, 2008; Bush & Middlewood, 2013). Within these broad literatures care is generally taken to define mentoring in ways that clarify this activity in contrast with coaching. In their recent review, and drawing on a conference presentation by Bassett (2001), Bush and Middlewood (2013) distinguish mentoring from coaching in the following way.

Mentoring has more to do with career and life development and cannot be successfully entered into between a learner and their manager or assessor. Whereas coaching is considered to be about enabling the individual to improve their performance in their chosen field and is commonly used in the sports and skills development arena. (p. 189)

Potential for research into the role of mentoring among clergy is illustrated in the qualitative study published by Newkirk and Cooper (2013) among African-American women Baptist church leaders. The study set out to address two core research questions: 'In what ways did being mentored, or not, affect perceptions of effectiveness in ministry'; and 'What role, if any, do mentors have in preparing ministers to advance to senior leadership positions?' In-depth interviews with ten African-American women Baptist church leaders demonstrated the importance of mentoring for growth into senior leadership positions.

However, there was a significant reluctance for ministers to serve as mentors. The study concluded by advocating that more serious attention should be given to encouraging and valuing the role of mentoring within the personal and professional development of church leaders.

### **Mentoring within the Church of England**

The notion of mentoring is gaining currency within the Church of England, especially in connection with core transition points in ministry. One such transition point is the movement into first incumbency. For example, the Report to the House of Bishops, *From frustration to fulfilment* (Church of England, 2006a), clearly identified the contribution that could be made by mentoring to support clergy taking up this level of responsibility for the first time, and suggested experienced clergy serving during their final decade of ministry before retirement as being well placed to provide such support. While, as a consequence of the new professional framework proposed by the ministry report, *Shaping the future: New patterns of training for lay and ordained ministry* (Church of England, 2006b), clergy may be better prepared for the challenges and opportunities of first incumbency, such preparation may not obviate the benefits of mentoring during this period.

Attention is drawn to the range of challenges still facing clergy during their first incumbency by the report, *The trajectory of vocation from bishops' advisory panel to first incumbency* (Aveyard, 2011). Alongside questionnaires completed by 21 individuals recently through their bishops' advisory panel and 25 individuals serving in years four through seven of initial ministerial education, Aveyard (2011) analysed the questionnaire responses of 23 individuals serving in their first incumbency. In this analysis Aveyard speaks of 'the huge "step up" that is required when a person becomes an incumbent' (p. 3). New incumbents:

have to face difficult and challenging situations where they are exposed in a way that assistants are not. Whether in pastoral encounters, in the Parochial Church Council

(PCC) or with the community organisations.... They are surrounded by almost infinite demands in building the church congregations, in pastoral care and presence in the community.... Those finishing their curacy think they have been well prepared. Two years into incumbency they say they have not been equipped enough. (Aveyard, 2011, pp. 20-21)

Reflecting on such observations, Aveyard (2011) argues that to equip ministers more effectively for the responsibilities of incumbency the Church needs to become more intentional about personal and professional formation. In particular he draws attention to processes that can promote and encourage formation into reflective practice without imagining that this can be turned into a further subject for academic study (p. 3). Here is one key role for mentoring.

In spite of the potential importance of mentoring to the experience and wellbeing of clergy serving in their first incumbency, as yet little empirical research has investigated this particular issue, with the exception of two pioneering studies. In the first of these two studies, using an on-line survey in the context of a Masters dissertation, Longden (2013) invited Diocesan Directors of Ministry (or their equivalent officers) across the 44 dioceses of the Church of England (including the Diocese of Europe) to provide data on their use of mentors during curacy and first incumbency. Replies were received from 33 dioceses, although by no means every question was answered by all participants. The results showed that, at first incumbency stage, 81% of responding dioceses (32) offered mentoring. In 78% of responding dioceses (23), the mentors were experienced clergy from within the diocese. In 22% of responding dioceses (23) experienced laity from within the diocese supplemented the number of clergy. In 67% of the responding dioceses (21) mentors were matched to first incumbents formally by a diocesan officer. In 29% of these responding dioceses (21) first incumbents made their own arrangements, with encouragement from diocesan staff, and in 5% of these

21 dioceses first incumbents chose informally from an approved diocesan list. In a small number of dioceses bishops or archdeacons were also actively involved in the matching process. In 88% of responding dioceses (25), mentors did not give reports on their mentees, but in the other 12% of dioceses, the mentors also had a reporting role. In 45% of responding dioceses (22) a face-to-face training course was offered to those serving as mentors.

In the second of these two studies, using a case study approach, Neal (2015) described a multi-church benefice in the rural Diocese of Truro in which a priest serving his first incumbency was mentored by a retired priest appointed to a part-time post in the benefice. In this case study, Neal (2015) drew attention to the range of areas in which mentoring may have supported the ministry of that first incumbent, including the negotiation of varied church practice across the wide range of church traditions among the churches within the benefice, and the management of technical and legal matters arising from churchyards and glebe. Neal (2015) also offered analysis of the distinctive role of the mentor in situations in which the incumbent and not the mentor holds ultimate responsibility for the benefice.

### **Research question**

The study reported by Neal (2015) raises an important question about the gifts and benefits that recently retired clergy may bring through the role of mentors to clergy serving their first incumbency. The aim of the present study is to uncover the extent to which diocesan bishops in the Church of England currently use retired clergy in the role of mentors to first incumbents and their views on the principle of using retired clergy in this way.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

A personal letter, together with a short questionnaire was emailed to the office of the diocesan bishop in all 43 dioceses of the Church of England (excluding the Diocese of Europe). In the covering letter the first author of this paper referred to his personal experience

as a retired priest in the Diocese of Truro serving as mentor to a colleague in his first incumbency, and to his intention to prepare a paper on the matter for the Bishop of Truro. The letter concluded as follows: 'I would like to know about the experiences of other bishops and other dioceses and it is here that your help would be much appreciated.' From the 43 dioceses contacted, 30 replies were received either from the bishops themselves or from those acting on their behalf, making a response rate of 68%.

### **Instrument**

The questionnaire posed two open-ended questions about mentoring and the role of retired clergy and allowed plenty of space for responses. The two questions were:

- Have you had any experience of drawing on retired clergy in your diocese in this way?
- What do you think about the idea in principle?

### **Analysis**

The data generated by this brief survey were amenable to both quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Current practice**

The first theme in the survey explored the extent to which the 30 bishops and dioceses that had participated in the survey had experience of retired clergy serving as mentors to clergy working in their first incumbency. The data demonstrated that 14 always used retired priests as mentors, 12 used retired priests as mentors occasionally, and four never used retired priests as mentors.

Those bishops and dioceses that had experience of retired clergy serving as mentors to clergy working in their first incumbency generally affirmed the experience. Here are two examples of that positive response.



Yes, we have had very positive experiences indeed in using retired clergy as mentors in this area. Unfortunately very few clergy retire here [an urban diocese], and so our opportunities are limited but there is no reluctance to take opportunities when they present themselves.

We have occasionally asked retired clergy to mentor some young or inexperienced priests for the first few months in their new parishes. I think it has been good for the retired clergy to think that their enormous skills have not been forgotten and much appreciated by the younger clergy, to have some wisdom in their first few months about the things that need to be addressed, and those things that it isn't worth fighting for.

Some, however, warned that mentoring may be better supported by recently retired clergy than by those who had been retired for a longer period. Here are two examples of that more cautious response.

Yes, but the credibility of the priest [mentor] decreases the longer in retirement.

We have used mentoring of clergy as a valuable way of support, especially in the early stages of a new ministry. Mentors ranged from serving clergy to key lay mentors, and yes some retired clergy, largely fairly recently retired. Older clergy generally had little experience of being mentors and were sometimes too far distant from the realities of being an incumbent now.

One bishop who did not draw on retired clergy as mentors explained his decision in the following way.

On the whole we have not considered retired clergy as mentors. This is not because in principle we are against this, but unfortunately there is a rather sad record of retired

clergy being rather critical of the present clergy, and therefore we don't want to tarnish the prospect of the wider introduction of mentoring, by using people who might be hastily critical of the work that today's clergy do.

### **The principle**

The second theme in the survey explored what the 30 bishops or dioceses that had participated in the survey thought about the principle of drawing on retired clergy to serve as mentors to clergy working in their first incumbency. The data demonstrated that 25 considered this to be a good idea in principle or a promising idea, three were unsure about the idea, and of the remaining two, one did not answer at all and one did not provide an explicit answer.

Those bishops and dioceses that supported in principle the notion of drawing on retired clergy as mentors to clergy working in their first incumbency, showed enthusiasm for the idea in a variety of ways. Here are three examples.

It makes eminent sense to use the experience and wisdom of retired clergy in this way – with just one proviso – that they have been kept abreast of developments in ministry and are therefore sensitive to the demands that change management places on clergy today.

In principle I believe retired clergy can be very valuable mentors, particularly in the earliest years after retirement when closest to the realities of the role now. However, some longer retired remain in touch with developments so are also valuable in the role.

I am very much in favour of this in principle. It is important that the appropriate skills are there and also that consultants/mentors attend the occasional briefing sessions. I

think it is also important for people to know when to stop – I say that because ours do that well!

### **The wider issue**

The third theme in the survey explored what broader ideas the 30 bishops or dioceses that had participated in the survey had about the wider future role of retired clergy in the Church of England. Most of the replies to the third question focused less on scoping future possibilities than on describing current practice. Of the 30 participants, six expressed no view on present practice or future possibilities. Among those who expressed views, the following roles were identified: mentors more generally (10), interim ministers in vacant parishes (7), rural deans (2), ministry or work consultants (2), reflective practitioner (1), worship leader (1), and assistant archdeacon (1).

Commenting on the role of retired clergy in their diocese many bishops acknowledged just how important the ministry of retired clergy is to the contemporary Church, but at the same time they acknowledged the danger associated with such dependency. Here are two ways in which such reservations were expressed.

In a Diocese like this we are very dependent on the ministry of retired clergy in the broadest sense. Our Strategy for Ministry up to and beyond 2020 continues that dependence. As a bulge of clergy in my age bracket will retire before then, that may give us some confidence in that dependency BUT we should not become overly reliant on retired clergy to fill gaps and delay the inevitability of more radical solutions to the reduction of the number of stipendiary clergy.

On the wider question, I value very much the ministry of retired clergy, but I believe it is important that we do not build a ministry strategy that is dependent on them.

As the policy develops for new models of leadership in smaller communities or for smaller churches, some bishops become aware of a strategic role for retired clergy, as expressed by the following two examples.

There are some who will, I hope, serve in this diocese as the local focal minister in small communities under the leadership of an incumbent who will have oversight of a benefice.

In this diocese we are actively seeking to appoint a “Leader” for each worshipping community. It could well be that we will look to active retired priests to offer this leadership.

Strategic thinking of this nature is also reflected in the comments of those bishops who wanted to consider retired clergy within their development strategy. Here are four examples of bishops taking a strategic approach to the effective deployment of retired clergy.

I believe that retired clergy increasingly have to be considered in the overall deployment of clergy. Some have a desire to do significant amounts of ministry. They should probably have licences rather than permission to officiate (PTO) and operate under Common Tenure. They are a vital part of the ministry resource for the church today.

I am hugely grateful that our retired clergy contribute both to parish ministry and the wider life of the diocese. In terms of the parish, I’m an advocate of them being treated as part of the ministry team, where they wish to be.

We are continually looking for ways to be more creative with our retired clergy and therefore when any one retires into the Diocese from within or without they have a meeting with the Rural Dean to discuss not only their willingness and availability for

helping out with worship etc., but also what particular skills and gifts they might have to offer to the Diocese.

We think it is important that a variety of posts in the Diocese are able to be filled by retired clergy, but not reserved for them alone. As you know the problem is that some retired clergy are pure gold while others are a trial to incumbents and their congregations.

The final comment comes from a diocesan bishop who reflected on his former experience as a suffragan bishop.

When I was a suffragan bishop, I would always meet newly retired clergy and ask them to reflect on how they would like to use each phase of their retirement. For example they might like to be licensed to a parish and, where appropriate, be given day to day pastoral responsibility in a non-stipendiary capacity for a small village church, or, they may wish to help as a sector minister. They may wish to exercise a piece of “Kingdom Ministry” by getting involved in local charities or local politics. We have also used retired clergy Interim Ministers and given them some stipend, perhaps for 2 or 3 days a week, while remaining in their own home. This has been a way of helping parishes especially when there are specific problems. An Interim Minister can sometimes bring reconciliation, or healing, before we appoint a permanent priest. I wish we could find more suitable priests to do this.

### **Conclusion**

This study set out to uncover the extent to which diocesan bishops in the Church of England currently use retired clergy in the role of mentors to first incumbents and their views on the principle of using retired clergy in this way. These two focused research questions were set in the context of the wider research question of exploring the bishops’ views on the

role of retired clergy in the Church. From the 43 diocesan bishops approached, 30 responded, making a response rate of 68%. Two main conclusions emerge from these data, one based on the quantitative responses and the other based on the qualitative responses.

The quantitative data demonstrated that the majority of the 30 participating bishops had experience of using retired clergy as mentors to clergy serving in their first incumbency (26) and that the majority of them also considered this to be a good idea in principle (25). The other most frequently named roles for retired clergy in these dioceses were as interim ministers in vacant parishes (7), as participating in clergy, reader, and lay training (3), and as spiritual directors (2).

The qualitative data demonstrated that the 30 participating bishops were reflecting on and giving considerable thought to the role of retired clergy serving in today's Church. Three main observations emerge from the range of comments offered. The first observation concerns a genuine appreciation of and recognition of the valuable contribution being made by retired clergy to the contemporary church. Here is a body of men and women who continue to bring commitment, wisdom and service to the Church into which they had been ordained. For many retired clergy retirement from stipendiary ministry does not mean retirement from their sense of vocation and call. Proper deployment in retirement for some retired clergy brings personal affirmation to them and enrichment to the Church. The other two observations, however, sound notes of caution.

The first note of caution concerns the danger of retired clergy losing touch with the developing shape of ministry within a constantly changing Church. Several of the participating bishops suggested that after a certain period of retirement retired clergy may become less effective and less helpful, perhaps especially in the field of mentoring younger colleagues. This caveat may highlight the need for dioceses that encourage the effective deployment of retired clergy to ensure that such retired clergy are kept fully involved with the

diocesan programmes of continuing ministerial education and continuing ministerial development.

The second note of caution concerns the danger that, if the Church were to rely too heavily on the deployment of retired clergy, this may detract from dealing with the long-term strategic problem of planning for sustainable ministry into the future. This caveat highlights the need for dioceses that encourage the effective deployment of retired clergy to do so within the context of a responsible ongoing audit of ministry needs and ministry resources involving an integrated vision for retired clergy alongside stipendiary clergy, other forms of ordained ministry, and forms of authorised (and unauthorised) lay ministry.

Given the apparently important role of the ongoing ministry of retired clergy within the current provision of Church of England dioceses, the lack of serious qualitative and quantitative research into the experiences of the retired clergy themselves seems somewhat puzzling. This may prove to be an area in which investment would be most worthwhile, both in terms of supporting the wellbeing of retired clergy themselves and in terms of sustaining or strengthening the wider ministry of the Church of England.

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